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The Russian Origins of Zionism: Interactions with the Empire as the Background of the Zionist World View

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The Zionist ideology is considered to have originated in Europe. But, exactly where in Europe did it originate? Theodor Herzl, the "Father of Zionism," is so famous that most people may believe that Zionism was born in Western Europe. He was raised in and he worked in the German-speaking world and is said to have followed Zionism after witnessing the Dreyfus Affair in France. However, as shown in Table 1 (on the last page), the majority of Zionist leaders were born in Eastern Europe and the Russian Empire (particularly in the regions that presently are Ukraine, Moldova, Belarus, Lithuania, and Poland). Yet, if we consider that the East followed the same path as the West, this fact would be insignificant. However, did the East really follow the West? I would like to emphasize three points that refute this notion and assert that these points affected the formation of the Zionist world view. For this purpose, we have to consider what Zionism meant to Zionists in their *local* context, and not in abstract contexts such as those of Europe, the West, modernity, or the Jewish world.[1] The following historical-sociological research work is based on an investigation of the Russian Zionists' public discussions in Zionist periodicals published mainly in Russian.[2]

Self-Presentation as a Nation in the Empire

The Russian Empire was literally an empire, i.e., a conglomerate of various communities, one of which was the Jewish community. Zionism has generally been considered as the movement involving the evacuation of Jews from Europe. However, before the Balfour Declaration and the collapse of the Empire, Zionists focused on the condition of Jews the Empire. This

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1 [Friesel 1996] emphasizes the importance of the local contexts in studying German Zionism and American Zionism. Compared to these two Zionisms, Russian Zionism (Zionism in or from the Russian Empire) was more political in its orientation; nevertheless, Russian Zionists had no intention of dividing the Russian Empire. While studies with such an outlook on Russian Zionism hardly exist, there certainly are a few works focusing on Russian Zionism. Jonathan Frankel's book (1981) is a pioneering work in this regard. However, while this book points out the transformation of Jewish political life in Russia, especially through the influence of the revolutionary movement and socialism, it hardly questions why Jews that became Zionists followed nationalism or discusses the significant aspects of Zionism in the context of the Russian Empire. Other comprehensive studies on Russian Zionism include [Maor 1986] and [Goldstein 1991]. Goldstein's works are provocative with respect to considering the qualitative differences between Russian and Western Zionisms, which are helpful in discussing the second point in this paper. For further details, see [Tsurumi 2008].

2 For the history and survey of Jewish periodicals in Russian, see [Slutsky 1978]. For more details on the first two points, see my article [Tsurumi 2008]

aspect has partly been known in the sense that they wanted to prepare prominent Jews within the Empire to lay the foundation of the Jewish society in Palestine (in the sense of the term *Gegenwartsarbeit*——work in the present).

More importantly, Russian Zionists also believed that the Zionist movement would improve the status of the Jews in the Empire. The Jewish people had been perceived, by Russian (occasionally, even Jewish) liberal intellectuals and socialists as outlaws or as a religious sect that should be assimilated into the majority. Zionists believed that in order to preserve the collective Jewish existence in the Empire, Jews would have to present themselves as a nation that is connected with their native land, Palestine. For example, considering the reason that only Jews were persecuted in the Empire, Leo Pinsker——the first leader of the Russian Zionist circle "*Hibbat Zion*"——wrote in his monumental pamphlet *Auto-Emancipation* that the Jew was "regarded as neither a friend nor a foe but as an alien [*Unbekannte*], the only thing known of whom is that he has no home." Consequently, "the nations never have to deal with a Jewish nation [*jüdischen Nation*] but always with mere *Jews* [*Juden*]" [Pinsker 1882: 2, 8; emphasis in original].

The recognition of the Jewish nationality was significant not only because it would help Jews gain respect as a community, but also because it would maintain the collectivity of the Jewry within the Empire. In the first issue of the Russian Zionist weekly *Evreiskaia Zhizn'*, Juris Brutskus wrote "The Jewish Question in the Russian Publications." He indicated that even the most progressive, liberal intelligentsias in Russia, while approving of the struggle for the rights of other nations, such as the Czechs and the Poles, proposed assimilation for Jews. According to him, they considered the Jews and their culture as deficient. Then, he asserted that "If we do not raise our own nation to the level equal to other nations in its value, we will be left behind and become extinct," and that "only the struggle for our national interests will make others to recognize our national equivalence among the nations of the world" [Brutskus 1904: 195–202].

The Helsingfors Program, which was adopted at the Third Russian Zionist Conference in Helsingfors in December 1906, reflected this atmosphere in a highly symbolic manner. It advocated "the democratization of the state institution based on strict parliamentarism, broad political freedom, the autonomy of national regions and guarantee of the rights of national minorities" in its first article, and "the recognition of Jewish nationality as a unified wholeness with the rights of self-government in all the affairs of the national mode of life" in its forth article [*Evreiskii Narod* 1906 no.7: 52].

The backlash for the government from the period after the Second State Duma (the Imperial Parliament, established after the 1905 Revolution) in 1907 apparently had a negative effect on the assumption of the Helsingfors Program. For instance, being disappointed after

the election for the Second Duma, Pasmanik wrote that his emphasis on Russian internal politics was misguided [Levin 2007: 147–165; Pasmanik 1909: 9].

However, even during the end of 1914, when the First World War had already begun and the condition of Jews in the Empire had further deteriorated, Abraham Idelson (under his penname Davidson), the editor of the Russian Zionist weekly *Razsvet* wrote the following:

> [A]ll the attempts to achieve Jewish autonomy in Palestine——even if these will not succeed——turn all the tactics upside-down. The claim for Palestine is the highest manifestation of the inner consciousness of our equivalency, and clearly it is the proclamation of ourselves as a nation [narod], having the right to a fragment of land on the earthy sphere, as Poles, a huge number of whom are living outside Poland and are not denied the full rights in the places of "dispersion" [Davidson 1914: 33].

Russian Zionism against Western Zionism

For Russian Zionists, however, the story was further complicated. Around fifteen years after the founding of Russian Zionism (1881–82), they had to confront the Western Zionists (led by Theodor Herzl), who emerged from a slightly different context. Russian Zionists, along with other Jewish enlighteners in the Empire, aspired to the modernization of the Jews. In contemporary Europe, Western Europe was considered to be the most modernized and progressed; therefore, Russian Zionists were subjected to Western Zionism insofar that Zionism was moving within the framework of western modernization. To counter this strategy, Russian Zionists began to emphasize Jewishness as an ethnicity in Zionism. As a typical example, during the Uganda Controversy (1903–05), in which Herzl and Western Zionists supported the option for establishing the future Jewish state in East Africa, many secular Russian Zionists aggressively opposed the option, claiming that the Western Zionists lacked Jewish nationalism. By their opposition, the Russian Zionists clarified the distinguishing features between their Zionism and Western Zionism——their Zionism was nationalistic; it did not merely involve philanthropy for the poor Eastern Jews.

However, it is inappropriate to infer that Russian Zionists rejected the Uganda proposal *because* they were traditional, irrational, and narrow-minded——or pre-modern. In fact, although this aspect was never emphasized in a broader context, it is well known that the proposal was approved by the members of the religious circle *Mizrachi*——the most traditional segment of the Eastern Zionists. The reason for their approval was that Herzl was their ally, and more importantly, that they considered securing a new land for the Jews outside Palestine to be a more favorable option since traditional Messianism forbids the Jews

from colonizing Palestine. The plan to send delegates to East Africa was approved because of their support. Furthermore, although those who opposed Herzl were mainly Eastern Zionists, they and their leaders in particular were relatively secular and well-acquainted with Western modernity.

The fact mentioned above implies that the conflict involved another aspect——the struggle of secular Russian Zionists for hegemony over Zionism. Interestingly, even Chaim Weizmann, who was a leading opponent of the Uganda proposal and was the first President of Israel, also from the Russian Empire, was not against the proposal just after Herzl's proposal. Jehuda Reinharz indicates that Weizmann's conversion to being an anti-Ugandist resulted from his political rather than ideological motives. Weizmann, who had no firm alliances with Western Zionist leaders, preferred being in the Russian Zionist camp because it was his only alternative in order to survive politically [Reinharz 1985: 172–174]. His conversion can also be interpreted in a broader context. Before the Uganda Controversy, as Joseph Goldstein demonstrated [Goldstein 1985], dissatisfaction over Herzlian Zionism was already smoldering among the secular Russian Zionists. Typical examples include the founding of the "Democratic Faction" by Weizmann in 1901, intended to counter Herzl's "autocratic" style, and the massive conference of Russian Zionists held in Minsk in September 1902, wherein the participants glorified Ahad Ha'am, who had long emphasized the importance of the spiritual and cultural aspects of Zionism [Zipperstein 1993: 187–189]. A more notable was the quarrel over Herzl's utopian novel *Altneuland*, which immediately preceded the Uganda controversy. The novel, in which Herzl described his vision of the future Jewish state, contained few Jewish elements. In his review of the novel, Ahad Ha'am severely criticized it for its non-Jewishness. In response to this review, Max Nordau, Herzl's right-hand man, bitterly counter-attacked the criticism, calling Ahad Ha'am an "enemy of culture" and deriding his vision of Palestine by describing it as hatefully byzantine, intolerant, anti-Western, and sickening. This exasperated some Russian Zionists and the dispute soon escalated into a conflict between the East and the West [Kornberg 1983; Zipperstein 1993: 197–198]. Weizmann wrote the following in March 1903, addressed to his future wife:

> The struggle between East and West within Jewry has now worsened, and [Herzl] has lightly flung the apple of discord into our camp. I trust that we shall finally succeed in letting the world know where hegemony in Jewry rightfully belongs——in the hands of [Nordau] or in those of the young, spiritually free Eastern Jews [Weizmann, 1971: 271].

During that period, Herzl's diplomatic strategy was almost at a deadlock, and for the first time, he expressed pessimism about its prospects in the foreseeable future [Kornberg 1983:

118]. This was followed by the Uganda controversy. Weizmann wrote about his concerns regarding hegemony in Zionism to Ussishkin, who was on a visit to Palestine when the Sixth Congress was held, and he eventually became a strong opponent of the East African scheme:

> If we do not come to the Congress with a defined programme concerning work in Palestine […], then we shall not be able to have even the 178 *Neinsager* [no-sayer] that we had [at the Congress], and we shall be powerless in the face of the solid block of *Mizrachi* and western Zionists who, in the name of 'the Jewish people' will say that Palestine cannot be had, that the people are starving, and therefore we must grab Africa! [Weizmann 1972: 11–12]

Thus, it is evident that Weizmann was completely aware of the three factions in Zionism——the Western Zionists, the religious Zionists, and the secular Eastern Zionists. He continued, "But if we are able to counter all these clamours not only with goodwill but also with a practical programme […], then we shall achieve power!" [Weizmann 1972: 12]

In reality, it was a culture and not a mere "programme," that the Russian Zionists had created. They propounded "Jewishness"——an attribute or knowledge that appears to be rooted in Jewish tradition and history——as the core essence of the Zionist culture. Obviously, Uganda, the country, is not related to any aspect of Jewishness. In order to clarify the goal of the anti-Ugandists during the controversy, Ussishkin wrote to his comrade that "The main point of Zionism is to save the Israeli nation [*am Israel*], not the poor brothers in Russia and Rumania." This was an antithesis to Herzl's philanthropic and paternalistic Zionism. In the conclusion of the letter, Ussishkin claimed, "The base of Zionism lies in Russia and those from Russia in the West" [Heymann 1977: 190]. Shortly after Herzl's sudden death in 1904, Ussishkin published a famous essay titled "Our Program" in *Evreiskaia Zhizn'* (distributed as a pamphlet in 1905), illustrating his program for the implementation of Zionism. Considering the fact that he had been considered to be a "practical Zionist" like Lilienblum until then, who emphasized the practical colonization of Palestine rather than a spiritual "revival" as propounded by Ahad Ha'am, Ussishkin now focused on the development of the spiritual and cultural aspects of Zionism in the pamphlet in addition to the practical and diplomatic aspects [Usyshkin 1904]. In a collection of essays commemorating the 25th anniversary of Herzl's death, Ussishkin contributed an article titled "Herzl the Stranger." He described his first impression of Herzl as follows: "He has one great defect […]: He knows absolutely nothing about the Jews, and therefore believes that Zionism is confronted by external obstacles only, and by no internal ones" [Ussishkin 1929: 48] .

Russian Zionists presented their form of natoinalism as superior to the way of life of the

Western Jewry. A relevant example is an article entitled "Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism" that appeared in the Russian Zionist weekly *Budushchnost'* (June 2, 1900). This article indicated that the Jews in Western Europe, who aspired to become the "universal human" with regard to cosmopolitanism——a product of the French Revolution——abandoned Jewishness and considered themselves to be German or French, while declaring themselves as German or French "patriots." Rebutting the argument that identified nationalism with chauvinism, the author asserted that nationalism refers to love for one's own nation; this was consistent with respect to other nations of the world. While an ideology of integrating various nations into one was the truest form of chauvinism, nationalism with the world order based on different nations would be the appropriate form of cosmopolitanism in the new epoch [Uryson 1900]. In other words, Russian Zionists assumed that, in contrast to the "assimilationist" Western Jewry, their ideology was aligned with the most appropriate and progressive world order, and that in this "imagined" world order, a nation was considered to be the basic unit of human society that is independent of state institutions.

The Problem of Neutrality in the Empire or the Triad

The third point that was absent in nation-states is the environment in which more than three actors existed in the same sphere (in nation-states, there existed one majority and some minorities whereas in empires, there existed more than two majorities such as the Russians and the Poles and some minorities).

In *Khronika Evreiskoi Zhizni*, the predecessor of *Razsvet*, the article "Germans, Poles, and We" appeared in January 1905. The author, Arnold Zaidenman, argues that while in Jews in the 19th century played the role of a buffer within multi-ethnic environments like those in Galicia and Poznan, such a political negativism was then risky because it would lead to the distrust of other nations. In Poznan, for example, as a result of Polish anti-Semitism, while the Jews allied with the Germans, the Jews were actually exploited by the Germans to Germanize the Poles. Consequently, the Poles began to perceive Jews as their enemy [Zaidenman 1905]. Zaidenman stressed that, in order to be truly neutral in the multinational environment, the Jews must present themselves as an independent nation that was never a puppet of other nations. In fact, during that period there were arguments in the Polish public space that clubbed the German and Prussian Jews together as the Polish enemy. While there were cooperative efforts between the Jews and the Poles during the 1905 revolution, it turned out that even within the Duma system, the Jews were in a difficult position with respect to the Russians and the Poles [Weeks 2008]. Pasmanik also referred to the history of Jews in the Austro-Hungarian Empire and considered the Jewish support of any dominant nation to be an error. The enlightened and liberated Jews "gained human rights, but with the very heavy price of supporting the Germans, which led to enmity with all the other peoples in a condition of

conquered and enslaved nations"[Pasmanik 1906: 75].

A similar logic was also used to convince Russian nationalists to refrain from the Russification of Jews. In January 1911, Vladimir Jabotinsky, a prominent contributor to Russian Zionist periodicals, contributed the article "Jewry and Its Trends" to the series of "Letters on Nationalities and Regions" in the leading monthly for Russian liberals *Russkaia Mysl'*. The journal was edited by Peter Struve, a leader of the Kadet. Jabotinsky opposed the assimilation of Jews into the "Russian nation," or the "Russification of Jews," proposed by Struve. Jabotinsky argued that in all the regions of Russia, except Poland, the Jews lived amidst the Little Russians (Ukrainians), Belarusians, Poles, Lithuanians, and Moldovans. The least in number of its neighboring nationalities are the Great Russians (Ethnic Russians). Hence, if Jews were Russified, it would imply that Jews were to be assimilated into a minority nation in the region. However, this would result in the following:

> In such a mixed environment as every province in the Pale of Settlement, joining to a specific culture among the neighboring ones would mean to provoke anti-Semitism among the rest of neighbors; it would be still more dangerous to take almost exclusively the role of the perfect carrier of the Great Russian culture——this would be equal to a provocation to all the local populations abandoned at once.

According to him, Ukrainians, Poles, or Lithuanians were already severely protesting the role of Russification by Jews [Zhabotinskii 1911: 112–113]. Unfortunately for the Zionists, Struve flatly refused the demand of Jabotinsky to recognize the national rights of the Jews and to make Russia a "state of nationalities," and not a "national state," on the grounds that, except for the Poles and Finlanders, there was no nationality that had a culture that was superior to that of the Russians [Struve 1911: 184–187].

Nevertheless, Russian Zionists believed that "*Splendidisolation*" [Pasmanik 1912: 14], or recognition as a single, solid, national entity that is independent of any other nation would be the least risky option in the multi-national environment. We are not sure whether this strategy was successful in reality, but what is important in the present article is that Zionist considered that to be recognized by others as a nation——or the "outfit" as a nation——had significance in such a context.

Conclusion

In the aforementioned manner, Russian Zionists struggled to participate in the Russian polity with full civil and national rights, particularly during the era from the 1905 Revolution to

the collapse of the Empire.[3] This was the heyday of Russian liberalism, albeit with many drawbacks. While Russian Zionism with regard to the Russian Zionist Organization and its publication, the *Razsvet*, was close to Russian liberalism, the Russian Zionists were critical of the assimilation policy of the prominent Russian liberalist party, the Kadet (Constitutional Democratic Party).

As shown in the first and third sections, Zionist thinking was based on a kind of "sociological imagination." It refers to an imagination that the attitude of ethnic groups toward the Jews was a function of their perception of the Jews. In other words, it is an imagination of the social interaction with others. However, it seems that with the exacerbation of the condition of the Jews during the First World War, and with the failure of the 1905 Revolution, Zionists no longer expected any fundamental improvement in the state of the Jews in the land of the newly established Soviet Empire. The new Empire may have exhibited despotism by socialists. Idelson (again, under his pen name) wrote in an October 1917 issue of *Razsvet* that "Russian masses are backward and less public and do not have sufficient will. […] Recent freedom is […] [merely] the result of the collapse" [Davidson 1917]. In 1918, he wrote that "despite the clearly declared conquest, we nevertheless stand before an uneasy perspective on the future and this evokes a depressed mood and makes us careful both in thought and deed" [Davidson 1918]. By this, he implied that the struggle of the Jewish and Zionists in the Empire, or their experiment of interaction with people in the Empire, had almost failed.

In sum, the Zionist ideology in Russia was formed by the "sociological imagination" of Russian Zionists, combined with their interaction with Western Zionists. However, the Russian Zionists were frustrated through the course of the subsequent deterioration of the condition of the Jews. If the Zionists had developed the "sociological imagination" in Palestine, they may have been more thoughtful when performing their deeds. In reality, however, even before they immigrated to Palestine, they seemed to have been convinced of the ineffectiveness of this imagination. The most symbolic aspect is that the weekly *Razsvet*, discontinued by the Soviet authority, resurged in Berlin (and later, in Paris) and soon became the organ of the Revisionists led by Vladimir Jabotinsky. He advocated constructing the "Iron Wall" around the Jewish society in Palestine, which would have hampered Zionist interaction with Arabs. Thus, the Zionist experience around the 1905 Revolution in the Russian Empire played a significant role in the development of Zionism in Palestine.

3 For an analysis of Jewish politics during the period of the First and Second Duma (National Assembly), see [Harcave 1943]. For the latest analysis of Jewish politics in the Empire during 1907–1914, see [Levin 2007].

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TABLE 1 : BIRTHPLACE OF ZIONIST LEADERS

Regions:		A (%)	B (%)
The Russian Empire	Ukraine	30	6
	Bessarabia	2	
	Belarus	26	6
	Lithuania	19	6
	Latvia	3	1
	Estonia	1	
	Poland*	23	5
	Outside the Pale of Settlement	4	
	The Empire in total	108 (55)	24 (65)
Other Eastern European regions	Romania	3	1
	Bosnia		1
	Hungary	4	2
	Galicia	12	
	Bukovina	1	
	Slovakia	1	
	Czech	3	
	Eastern Europe in total	24 (12)	4 (11)
Western Europe	Austria	8	1
	Germany	14	3
	Britain	12	1
	France	2	2
	Italy	3	
	Switzerland	2	
	Western Europe in total	41 (21)	7 (19)
North America	USA	12	2
	Canada	2	
	North America in total	14 (7)	2 (5)
Others	Palestine	6	
	India	1	
	South Africa	1	
	Others in total	8(4)	
In Total		195 (100)	37 (100)

Sources: A: Birthplace of the 195 Zionists leaders listed in the title "Zionist Leardership (2. Major Zionist Leaders)," in Hershel Edelheit and Abraham J. Edelheit, *History of Zionism: A Handbook and Dictionary* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000). B: Birthplace of the 37 Zionist thinkers included in the authoritative anthology, Arthur Hertzberg (ed.), *The Zionist Idea: A Historical Analysis and Reader* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1959). *Poland here includes the territories of Germany and Austro-Hungary.

Source: [Tsurumi 2008: 363]